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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay

Abstract

As I started the administration program at the University of Northern Iowa I knew that being a principal would be a difficult job. I had imagined that the bulk of the job would be dealing with things such as discipline, working with the budget, hiring, evaluating, and extracurricular activities. After completing my practicum and most of the required course work, I now realize that there is much more involvement than I had ever anticipated. Things such as public relations, staff development, being an instructional leader, a technology leader, and so much more.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
William D. Boevers
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SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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As I started the administration program at the University of Northern Iowa I knew that being a principal would be a difficult job. I had imagined that the bulk of the job would be dealing with things such as discipline, working with the budget, hiring, evaluating, and extracurricular activities. After completing my practicum and most of the required course work, I now realize that there is much more involvement than I had ever anticipated. Things such as public relations, staff development, being an instructional leader, a technology leader, and so much more.

Having only taught in one building since graduating from college my experience working with different principals is very limited. At the Senior High in Fort Dodge, we have a head principal and three assistant principals. Each one of them has their own unique style and vision. As a unit however, they have made a commitment to site based decision making. The administration at the high school and the entire district tries to let the faculty be involved in as many of the major decisions as possible. According to Lange (1993) a total district commitment is required for site-based decision making (SBDM) to be effective. After working in a district that practices SBDM I think it would be very challenging to go to work in a district where the principal made all of the decisions without

any input from the staff. Although we practice SBDM, we don't use shared decision making and I believe that developing a vision with the staff is more beneficial than developing a vision for the staff.

Our administrators ask for input both formally and informally. For instance, the administration will normally take a survey at a faculty meeting to get a feel for the climate on specific issues. From that survey they can determine how the faculty feels about a specific item. If they believe the support is there to pursue the matter any further they can do that with a vote. In our district an 80% consensus is needed to adopt a change. (In Fort Dodge we have defined "consensus" as 80% of the staff voting to support a proposed change). An informal way of getting input from the teachers is to ask them what their feelings are on certain things while speaking with them in the hall or in the office. If an administrator is going to collect information this way he/she would be well advised to consider the source before giving too much weight to what was said. A lot of people tend to exaggerate to promote their side of the story. By getting the opinion of the staff the administration is promoting ownership among the teachers. If a principal is going to lead a building then everybody must share in the same dream or they will not follow. Lezotte (1994) found that

people follow leaders because they share the same dreams, not because they are afraid of the consequences of not following. Therefore, I believe that the principal's leadership style dictates the direction of a building.

Another important aspect of creating a successful school is parent involvement. There are many advantages in getting the parents involved in the school and one that I would like to focus on is that the parents can develop ownership just like the teachers do if they feel they are part of what is happening at school. In our situation at Fort Dodge it seems that at many times the parents are pitted against the teachers and administration. If a student is not as successful as a parent would prefer, the easy thing to do is to blame the school. I believe that if parents would take a more active role in their child's education they would try to find solutions to the problems that children are having instead of just trying to find somebody else to blame.

I feel that everybody involved in education should share one belief; and that is that everything we do is trying to prepare our students for the real world after they graduate. Living in the times that we do kids need to be taught to use different types of technology that are available today. Computers are all around us and if a child is not exposed to them before graduation then

the school has not given that student a fair chance to succeed. Students who have had experience with technology have a tremendous advantage when they are competing for the same job. The problem for many schools is not the actual training with technology, it is finding a way to pay for it.

One final belief that I have about improving schools is that evaluation can be a tool that helps teachers improve their own methods, which in the long run will improve student learning. Some teachers believe that the reason for an evaluation is to give the administrator ammunition for termination. Evaluation on the other hand usually is a time for the teacher to be complimented on the positives that are being demonstrated. It is also a chance for the administrator to suggest some other techniques that may improve student performance. After all, we should have the same objective, and that is to do what is best for the students.

Because of these strong beliefs I will reflect on leadership style, parental involvement, technology, and professional evaluation. My beliefs will be supported by the literature and reflection will explain how these beliefs can be put into action.

Leadership Style

I believe a principal is the leader of the building, and as a leader it is important to have a particular style. In my opinion, it is important to have the support of the faculty and make sure everybody is going in the same direction. Being a teacher and working with teachers all day long I know that we consider ourselves to be both professionals and experts in our fields. Since most teachers share this belief the majority of us want some type of input involving changes that will effect our jobs. I believe a vehicle that allows teachers to get involved in the decision making process is site-based shared decision making.

Site-based shared decision making is a move from educating by intimidation to education by ownership. Allowing staff members to help make decisions develops a sense of ownership among them. This seems to be a better way of directing a teaching staff when it is compared to the old pyramid leadership style where the principal made all of the decisions and that was that. In Fort Dodge we use site based decision making which is just making more decisions at the building level. What we do is not "shared" because most of the changes that are taking place are what the administration wants instead of a vision of the faculty and principals. By using SBDM, but not having a shared vision we are not

promoting ownership which undermines many things we try to do.

Site-based shared decision making (SBSDM) is not as easy as it may sound. First of all, if a change is going to take place the teachers must be willing to change (James, 1995). It seems to me that in just about any building there are going to be some who are willing to try anything, some who won't try anything, and the majority of teachers could be persuaded to try something new if they believe it is in the best interest of the kids. The idea is to get the faculty working together to find what will work best for their particular school. If they all work together then they develop ownership which will make them work harder to make the change succeed.

If I were the principal in a high school and I thought that a new schedule would better meet the needs of the most students then there is a series of steps that I must go through to implement the new schedule. To start with, if a change that the principal wants is going to take place, the principal will need to be the catalyst for the change (Chamley, Caprio, & Younge, 1994). Odds are that if I walked into the next faculty meeting and asked the teachers to reach consensus on keeping the current schedule or switching to a block schedule it would have no chance of passing. If on the

other hand I asked the staff to investigate some different types of schedules that might improve student learning they may be able to find a solution to the problem. The point is that by developing the plan together we all feel involved and will hopefully work harder to see it succeed.

In Fort Dodge we are preparing to make the switch from a traditional schedule to a "4X4"/block schedule. When a possible change in the schedule was first brought up there was a lot of opposition to it. We have a teaching staff that has been teaching under the same conditions for a number of years and believes they do a very good job. Because of this many are resistant to change. At this point the administrators need to create a climate conducive to change (Aquila & Galvic 1988). Teachers need to know that there will be in service time to help make the transition a smooth one. The faculty needs to believe they can try something new and not feel like they are in danger of making a fatal error. According to Lange (1993) the principal's role is more one who delegates duties to staff members. This would be the time to get the staff to develop their dreams with the administration. Allowing teachers to make decisions also improves staff morale (Gorton & Schneider, 1991). People are more motivated when they participate in organizational decision making, because

when they have had a choice in a decision they will work harder to make it work. On the other hand if it were a decision passed down by the principal some would not be as eager to see it succeed. Most schools that utilize SBSDM have a belief that allowing teachers to participate in the decision making process will motivate teachers and make schools run better. The result of that should be a better education for our kids. What is best for the kids should be the reason for any type of a change in the schools, unfortunately other factors such as time and money are also variables that need to be considered. White (1989) stated "Site based management enables school personnel to make better decisions and improve school learning" (p.6).

As a whole there are many advantages of SBSDM, however it is not a perfect model either. Some disadvantages include the amount of time that it takes to make a decision. Principals must give teachers time to participate in decision making (Guskey & Peterson, 1995). For instance, we started talking about changing the daily schedule in the fall of 1994. It wasn't until January of 1996 that the school board voted to accept our recommendation and change to the block schedule. To an outsider that may seem like a long time to make a change, but if spending that time is what makes it

successful for the teachers and kids then it is time well spent.

The next pitfall of SBSDM is that if the faculty does not decide the way the administration wants then there is a conflict of interest. Should a principal go against the consensus of the faculty? The principal may have an idea that looks good, but the teachers may feel differently. My belief is that if the faculty is allowed to make a decision then their choice should be accepted. I don't have a problem with trying to change the minds of some of them before they reach consensus. The only way I would not accept a decision by the faculty is if I could stand in front of them and say "we can't do this because". Unless there is a justifiable reason for not accepting their recommendation, it seems that just saying no and leaving it at that contradicts what we are trying to do with SBSDM not to mention losing a lot of trust from the staff. If there is some alternative that I simply would not be able to accept, then I would explain my position to them before they spent time talking about it.

The last real problem that I see with SBSDM is that some perceive it as a way for the principal to get out of work. This is not the case at all. In fact it probably creates more work than it eliminates. We have some teachers just like everybody else who see the

principal as never doing his/her job, making statements like "He/She doesn't know how to make a decision", or "All he/she does is give their work to somebody else". The fact is that many times it would be easier to just make a decision and not look back, however that is not the way SBSDM works. I even find myself saying at times that "I don't want to take the time to deal with this." That will be one of the problems, but if teachers understand that we are trying to develop ownership and involve them in decision making they will make the time.

When leadership style of a school is looked at it seems to me that using the knowledge of the teachers around you will not only help a principal make difficult decisions, it gives the teachers a sense of ownership, and allows them to be more involved. Hopefully this ownership motivates them to do a better job as teachers which should enhance student learning (Conway & Calzi, 1995). After all, the goal of our schools is to give the students the best education possible.

Parental Involvement

Fifteen years ago when I was going through a small high school in northeast Iowa, there was only one boy in my class of 57 who didn't come from a traditional two parent home. I knew of only three classmates who used drugs and because of that, they were in their own separate clique. My parents set a curfew for us that

was never later than 1:00 a.m. which I never dreamed of challenging. We ate dinner together every night at 5:00 p.m. unless we were at some type of practice or had some other event that could not be avoided. My life was structured and so were the lives of most kids with whom I was friends with.

Five years ago I moved to Fort Dodge and was amazed at how different things can be. Twenty four percent of the students in my classes are being raised by a single parent or with the help of a step parent. Kids talk openly about the number of students in the school who are using drugs consistently. In a survey given to all students this winter 39% admitted to using drugs other than alcohol at least once a week. In the past 10 months, two young ladies have been killed in separate car accidents and it doesn't seem to phase the kids. I have heard 9th grade students telling their friends that they stayed out all night and I have to wonder why the parents allow that to happen. In my Algebra II class I had three teenage mothers in the beginning of the year, but one of them has dropped out of school. Right now in the junior class we have 17 girls who are either mothers or expectant mothers.

As I think about all of these situations that are happening in our school I can't help but wonder what these parents are thinking. It is hard for me to

imagine why a 14 year old child would be staying out until dawn.

Certainly it is not a principal's job to go into the community and tell the parents what a terrible job they are doing nor, should the school try to take on that task. Schools can however try to get parents involved and try to increase the value of a good education. If a child is not succeeding in class then strides need to be made to help that child. In a study by Coulombe (1995) it was discovered that "supportive parental involvement increases the probability that students will succeed academically" (p.72). In a similar study, Keith (1993) found parental involvement had a positive influence on all academic areas including homework completion. It seems that if parents get actively involved in their children's education they start to develop ownership in their kid's academic success. If parents feel comfortable, they can sit down and actually help the student with homework, but if the work is too difficult for the parent they can do their part by simply providing a quiet place to study. Another tip might be to set up the same time every night or even just a couple times a week would help. Anything to help the student develop some study skills would benefit the kids in the long run.

Another way that the parents can help is by setting up, monitoring, and enforcing individual family policies (Beck & Lockhart, 1992). For a student to get the most out of an education they need to be alert and awake while attending school. Allowing a teenager to be out of the house after midnight is not doing him/her a favor. Teens need to get a certain amount of rest every night just like everybody else. If they are coming to school on four hours of sleep and possibly hung over then most of the day is going to be a waste. Kids in the early teens are not mature enough to make good decisions on what time is the right time to come home at night. Perhaps some of these teens need a little more structure in their lives and they would have a better chance of succeeding.

The difficult part about this is conveying the message to parents. One way of handling this could be through school newsletters that are sent home to parents emphasizing the importance of a good nights sleep and how it effects student performance the next day. Teachers can point out to parents that a particular student seems tired quite often and suggest that more sleep may help. If the school needs they can provide parents information on things such as securing services for job training, education in early childhood development, and where they can receive adult education.

Also, the school could teach parents to monitor children, be positive, and make discipline fair and appropriate. Some would say that it is none of the school's business, however, we are still trying to do what is best for the kids.

There are other ways that parents can get involved such as booster clubs and parent teacher associations. Being in the booster club does not necessarily mean that a parent has to donate a large sum of money. The donation could be time as well. Any way to get the parents involved should help the school-parent relationship, and hopefully develop some pride about the school.

There are still other ways that schools can help parents get involved in school. Some may feel comfortable coming in to specific classrooms and helping the teacher, others might want to help supervise the lunchroom or student center.

Some parents may feel like they don't fit in or are inadequate to work in the school. At this point it is up to the principal and teachers to help make them feel welcome. Sasser (1991) found that most parents want to be involved but are deterred because of school practices and administrative/staff perceptions of parents. For this reason, if the school wants to get more parents involved, then the effort needs to be made by the

school. Having parents working with the school instead of against the school will only help student performance over time.

Technology

Going through high school in the middle 1980's, there was very little technology available. During my senior year I took a computer programming class and all we did was try to learn how to write programs that would run on the two Apple II E computers that we had. During that time period we really didn't know what kind of an impact computers would have on society. Most of us believed that they would be used for things such as math calculations and other simple, time consuming tasks. We never dreamed that the computer generation would have exploded the way it has. Things like the inter net, E-MAIL, and fax machines have change the way the world works. Since technology is becoming more common just about everywhere, I believe that schools need to expose students to it before they graduate from high school.

One of the drawbacks of technology is the huge cost that goes with it. A school district could spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in just a few years when costs such as initial buying, linking rooms together, training, and updating are all added in. This doesn't include expenses such as buying software, cleaning, and repairs the machines may need.

The reason for buying and using technology is the same reason we do anything in school, it is what is best for the kids. For our students to have the best chance in competing for jobs after high school, computer and other technology skills will give them an advantage over students who have not had the same exposure. In today's market place computers are all around and they are here to stay.

Technology includes more than computers. For instance, math classes use graphing calculators in a variety of different ways. Graphing complex functions used to take many minutes just to get an inaccurate sketch of a graph, but now an exact graph can be created in just a few seconds. These machines can be used for many other operations ranging from simple arithmetic to differentiating and integrating in calculus. Technology like liquid crystal display (LCD) panels can be used to help a science teacher point out different parts of a micro organism on a slide under a microscope. Compact disc (CD) Roms can be used to enhance a social studies class so students can actually see how people in different parts of the world live. With all of the technology available students don't have to memorize so much information, they just need to know how to access it.

Technology not only prepares our students for their lives after graduation, it also can help motivate students as found in a recent study by Losak and MacFarland (1994). In more specific terms, technology helps students learn more complex problem solving skills (Sheingold, 1991). Students are no different from most other people, they like to do something different from time to time. Sitting in a chair and listening to a teacher for fifty minutes day after day has to get boring. Bringing technology into the classroom gives students a chance to experience something different and hopefully learn more from it. By utilizing all that is available the students can be more active in their education instead of just reading to learn.

If students are going to use technology in the classroom, the teachers have to learn how to use it first. A problem that schools face is we do not train teachers before we buy computers, or buy them first, and then train teachers after they have arrived. According to West (1994), schools need to have the technology before the teachers are trained. The reasoning behind that is simple. The faculty should use the information they learn immediately or they will forget what they learned. Training the teachers can be quite expensive for the district, however, if the money is not spent the machines will not be used the way that they could.

Another problem with implementing technology is getting everybody to use it. Inevitably some members of the faculty will resist the new methods of teaching. A principal can try to bring those individuals along first by explaining and sharing the benefits of using what is available. Benefits for the teacher as well as the students. Another way to show the staff the importance of using technology is by modeling. Principals need to use computers if they expect their teachers to. One other way to get teachers to use the technology is to hire people who already know how to use it. This process will take a long time, but after a few years it will have an impact.

Another reason for schools to use the available technology is for accessing student information, and communicating with other teachers. In a large school it takes a lot of time to go to the office, look up a student's schedule, and talk to all of the teachers that student may have. If a student is having problems in a particular teacher's class and that teacher is concerned, chances are there won't be enough time to track down all of the teachers and find out if there are similar problems in other classes. If computers were linked to all classrooms as well as the office, then asking other teachers about the problems would be simple as well as saving many valuable minutes.

Finally, a district has to have some type of vision for its technology plan. It would be very foolish to spend thousands of dollars on computers and other technology without going in a specific direction. Naturally this plan will need to be adjusted periodically, but a school has to have some idea of how it will use the technology before these large sums of money are spent.

Evaluation

Principals spend little or no time actually teaching in the classroom. In that respect, becoming a principal removes that person from contact, in a teaching environment, with kids and prevents that individual from doing more for students. To me, the reason for becoming an administrator is to do more for the students, not less. One way that a principal can have a direct impact on the amount students learn in school is by evaluation of teachers. From this perspective a principal can enhance the learning of every student in every class.

Evaluation is a double-edged sword. Some view it as a chance for an administrator to get ammunition that may need to be used somewhere in the future, or an opportunity to be criticized of ones teaching style. Others see evaluation for what it should be, two people

working together trying to improve teaching techniques and ultimately student learning.

To get the most out of classroom evaluation it should be a non-threatening experience. A principal should be clear on what the intentions are before entering the class. In most cases an evaluation is a chance for the principal to see what is being taught in the class and to give feedback on what was observed. The goal of evaluation is to help the teachers be more effective (Egelson, 1994). The administrator can observe the lesson and give feedback. At the post conference an exchange of what worked and what might improve the lesson can be discussed. It is important to point out the positives from the class to give the teacher confidence (Hartzell, 1995). Teachers like to be complimented just like everybody else. This doesn't mean that a principal can't be critical of teaching techniques, but it is important to praise the things that went well. If faculty members know that a principal is trying to catch them doing something good, the evaluation process will be more effective. Pajak (1993) pointed out that we are trying to perfect teaching styles, instead of cutting teachers down and criticizing them for shortcomings.

Teachers can also be trained to improve performances during the year without an administrator looking over their shoulders. One way of accomplishing

this is to have staff members self-evaluate. Evaluations can be done on their own lessons, as well as by looking at student performance. Teachers can reflect on lessons that were taught and pick out what worked and what did not. By doing this, changes can be made and student performance will improve. When student performance is measured a teacher can try to find a different approach for teaching material that was not learned.

Teaching can be compared to coaching. After every game, if not every practice, good coaches stop and think about things that the team did well and also where improvement is needed. After finding the weaknesses, a new practice plan is created to work on the problem areas. After the next game a coach starts all over and does it again. For some reason teachers believe that the first lesson plan they write is the best possible, and it is never changed. The same lesson is used year after year. If they could be trained to reflect on each lesson or unit and make the necessary changes, student learning would improve.

Another method for improving teacher performance is helping teachers create a "Personal Improvement Commitment" (PIC) (Decker, personal communication, 1995). At the end of each year the principal can sit down with individual teachers and find some way that the teacher can improve. It can be as big or as

small as each teacher wants, but the idea is to get them moving in the right direction. Over a period of years a lot of small steps can mean a large improvement for each teacher.

The goal of the PIC is to improve the quality of education, and for that to happen the teachers must continue to learn and grow. It should be specific to a certain area for the individual, and be something that is attainable. There also needs to be a time line for the educator to accomplish the goal. Finally it needs to be implemented and observed.

An example of one might be improving organizational skills by always having the desk cleared off every night before going home. The goal is to improve organizational skills, specifically having the desk cleaned off every night. It is measurable, and could be monitored using a checklist. Then a time line needs to be set up, maybe for one week at a time. After a few weeks the PIC may need to be revised if the plan was too difficult to reach. A teacher should be able to accomplish the goal and ultimately improve their performance.

Evaluation can be used as a tool to help teachers improve. It is a principal's responsibility to help the teachers. By providing a non-threatening environment, and letting the staff know that all share the same goal

of giving kids the best education possible a principal can make a difference.

Conclusion

As I look back a few years ago when I first started my course work, being a principal seemed like it wouldn't be much more challenging than teaching. I felt like I put as much or more time in as the administration but just wasn't paid as much. I knew there would be different types of problems to handle, but that was part of teaching every day. After completing my practicum it is apparent that there is so much more involved. Administrators put in countless hours attending school functions and meetings. They are expected to deal with problems whenever they come up, and always have the correct answer.

As a teacher I feel like I am doing a lot of good for my students. There is satisfaction in teaching a group of students a concept and then watching them succeed when they are asked to use the new knowledge. From time to time former students come up and say "I really learned a lot in your class", or students will say that "algebra is my favorite class". After I get my first administration job I probably won't hear things like that anymore.

As a principal I will have a different role that consist of helping teachers do a better job which in

turn improves student learning. I will be encouraging teachers to use technology so they can teach their students to use it. Part of my job will be to get parents involved in their kid's education, and teach them that parents can have a positive impact on the education of their children. I will try to create ownership among the staff by allowing the teachers to make decisions that will make the school run more effectively. Finally, by evaluating teachers and giving them ideas for improvement, I will make them better educators.

One of my friends that I teach with recently said to me "you're going to leave us aren't you". What he meant by that was by becoming a principal I wouldn't be as involved in education as I now am because I wouldn't be teaching. He felt that if I wasn't teaching, then I wasn't doing all I could for the kids. I do not buy that argument. By becoming a principal I will be able to do more for kids, I will just be doing it in a different way.

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